DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 243 758 SO 015 595

AUTHOR Mork, Gordon R.
TITLE Life and Death in Nazi Germany: Moral Decision Making in the Classroom.
PUB DATE Dec 83
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the American Historical Association Conference (San Francisco, CA, December 1983).
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Anti Semitism; *Decision Making; Ethnic Discrimination; Higher Education; *History Instruction; Instructional Materials; Jews; Learning Activities; *Moral Values; *Nazism; Religious Discrimination; *Value Judgment; *World History
IDENTIFIERS *Guided Design

ABSTRACT

A teaching technique called guided design is used in this exercise to help college students enrolled in introductory world history courses learn about the Nazi persecution of the Jews. Providing a change of pace to traditional lectures, readings, exams, and papers in history courses, guided design, as used in this activity, confronts students with the documentation of past Nazi events and leads them to productive discussions involving the moral and practical decisions demanded by those events. Included are teacher instructions and student materials. Intended for use during a single 50-minute period, the exercise requires no prior announcement, no special reading, and no library assignment. Previous exposure to general textbook accounts and lecture material on totalitarianism, World War II, and Nazi generals is helpful. At the beginning of the class, students are divided into three or four person decision groups. Prepared materials are distributed, and the ground rules of the guided design are explained. Student groups are presented with questions which they must discuss, and then reach a group consensus. Each group presents its consensus to the class as a whole. (RM)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Gordon R. Mork
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

ED243758

LIFE AND DEATH IN NAZI GERMANY

Moral Decision Making in the Classroom

by

Gordon R. Mork

American Historical Association
December 1983

How often have we historians and teachers of history lamented the dearth of productive discussion in college level history classes? There are many reasons for this lack of success: classes are too large; students are too ill prepared to contribute significantly; there is so much material to cover and so little class time. Two professors of engineering, Charles Wales and Robert Stager, have developed an elaborately structured discussion technique which they call the "Guided Design" to overcome some of these same problems in their discipline.[1] As engineers, teaching young people preparing for careers in that profession, they are strongly oriented toward a problem-solving approach. Introductory history classes, generally, are more concerned with content than with methodology, so the Guided Design approach has to be shifted somewhat in my courses (though I once wrote a fifty minute Guided Design to help students solve the problem of how to write a book review). Nevertheless, history classes can be directly confronted with the documentation of past events, and can be led to productive discussions involving the moral and practical decisions once demanded by those events, by using this technique.

This morning I intend to walk you through a decision making exercise I have developed for my introductory world history course (freshman and sophomore level), which deals with the Nazi persecution of the Jews. The exercise is intended for use during a single fifty minute period. There is no prior announcement, no special reading, no library assignment.

SO 015 595

---

[1] See Charles E. Wales and Robert A. Stager, The Guided Design Approach (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1978) and my article "Guided Design as a Teaching Tool . . . " in Teaching History: A Journal of Methods, 7/2(1982), 58-66. I wish to thank Prof. Wales and my colleague in Education, John Feldhusen, who introduced me to the approach at a faculty workshop.

Students have been previously exposed to general textbook accounts and lecture material on totalitarianism, World War II, and Nazi genocide. At the beginning of the hour they are formed into three or four person "decision groups" which will talk over each question as it is presented, and be prepared to report its consensus to the class as a whole. Most students are familiar with this small group/large group format and seem to respond to it without demur. Prepared materials are distributed and the ground rules of the Guided Design are explained.

This morning, I will lead you through the content of the model exercise,[2] but--in view of the time constraints, I will let you remain as passive individuals, rather than asking you to form into groups or engage in the discussion. However, I would ask you to refrain from turning the pages of the prepared materials[3] I have distributed until told to do so, thus preserving some of the structure of the designated format.

Now please look at the first page of your packet, the DIRECTIONS.

Life and Death in Nazi Germany

The Nazi years are the object of horror and fascination for many an American student of the 1980s. But what was it like to have lived then and to have faced the choices which were confronted by individual Germans? Using the Guided Design format, this exercise will ask you to put yourself in the shoes of Germans who lived in those days.

Please Read INSTRUCTION A on the next page when asked to do so. Then discuss the matter with your fellow students in your decision group and be prepared to share your

---

[2]The materials, DIRECTIONS, INSTRUCTIONS, and FEEDBACKS, were distributed to those in the room when the paper was delivered.

[3]I am pleased to acknowledge my debts to my colleagues, Earle Randall, Gunther Rothenberg, and Dennis Noble, who called my attention to documents used in this exercise.

decision with the class as a whole. After the class has discussed the matter you will be given a written FEEDBACK A to check against your decision.

From an academic point of view, there are no "right" or "wrong" answers. The exercise is designed to simulate the ethical and practical problems confronted by real people in Nazi Germany. Most of the material is self-explanatory, but if you have questions don't hesitate to raise your hand and I'll try to answer them.

Students may either be asked to read the directions silently prior to discussion in their decision groups or--as I've done here today--they may be asked to follow along while the sheet is read aloud by the instructor. Now, please turn to the next page and read INSTRUCTION A.

INSTRUCTION A

Let us say that you are Fräulein Frieda Kohler, a school teacher in Germany. It is September, 1941, two years into World War II. Though you are not politically active, you have always considered yourself a loyal and patriotic German. Each week you receive a poster from the central office of the local NSDAP, the Nazi Party. Most contain brief nationalistic slogans about winning the war, like "TO ACHIEVE GREAT SUCCESS, YOU MUST TAKE RISKS" or "GOD HELPS THE NATION WHICH HELPS ITSELF." Though there is no official requirement to do so, your practice is to post it in your fourth grade classroom and have your pupils memorize it for a weekly test. This week the poster has a longer slogan:

"IF INTERNATIONAL FINANCE JEWRY SHOULD AGAIN SUCCEED IN HURLING THE NATIONS INTO A WORLD WAR, THEN THE RESULT WILL NOT BE THE VICTORY OF JEWRY, BUT RATHER THE ANNIHILATION OF THE

JEWISH RACE IN EUROPE.

--ADOLF HITLER"

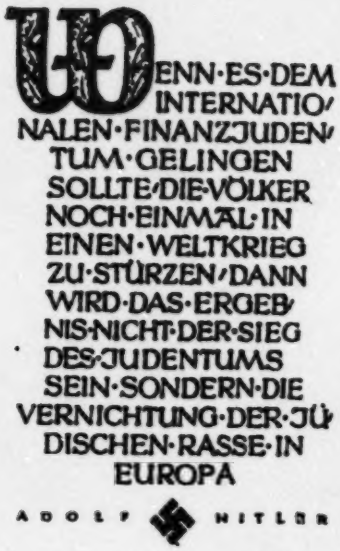
What do you do? Do you display this poster and test the children on it, as usual? Ignore the poster, reusing some past one instead? Or something else? Discuss your options with your decision group, arrive at a consensus, and be prepared to report it to the class.

Sometimes the groups take a bit of prodding to get discussion started, and you may wish to roam around the room encouraging them or fielding questions. Students may not have the chronology of World War II and the Holocaust firmly in mind, so you may wish to point out that in September 1941 German Jews, a minority of less than one percent of the population, had been the targets of bitter propaganda, discrimination, and segregation, but that they had not yet been systematically deported to concentration camps. After five minutes or so of small group discussion, I call on spokespersons from each group to share the group's ideas with the whole. My students tended to respond with options ranging from "I'd post the slogan, but give no test," to "I'd post it and give the test as usual." Some said they would post the slogan but indicate subtly that they disapproved of it.

Without passing judgement on their responses, I then have them look at FEEDBACK A.

FEEDBACK A

We do not know what Fräulein Kohler did. The teacher's name is fictitious, but the poster is real. Each week a new one was distributed by party headquarters in Munich. This one quotes Hitler's public speech to the Reichstag (the German parliament) of January 30, 1939.



There has been considerable controversy since 1945 about how much the German populace knew about Hitler's genocide policy, the details of which were officially secret. But there was nothing secret about this speech or the poster, which was issued for public display for the week of September 7-13, 1941. During that week, moreover, all German Jews were ordered to wear the yellow star,[4] whenever they appeared in public, and systematic deportations of German Jews "to the East" began. If you, as Fräulein Kohler, decided to use the poster in your classroom, you were a participant in Hitler's "final solution to the Jewish problem."

Then we go on to INSTRUCTION B; please turn the page.

INSTRUCTION B

It is again September, 1941. You are Erwin Bingel, a German regular army

[4]The Jewish star order was published September 1, 1941, in the equivalent of our Federal Register. It is reprinted in Joseph Walk (ed.), Das Sonderrecht für die Juden im NS-Staat (Heidelberg, 1981), p. 347.

lieutenant. Seriously wounded in 1940, you have recovered sufficiently to be assigned to a unit whose duty it is to guard prisoners of war. You have been shipped to a newly captured part of Russia, and given orders to guard an airport outside of the small town of Uman, near Kiev. You are ordered to prevent all unauthorized persons, including members of the German military, from entering the facility.

Very early on September 15th you and your men surround the airport as instructed. At first light, you see that several thousand Jewish men, women, and children have been marched to the airport and lined up before long tables in front of newly excavated ditches. Then the people are required to turn in all their clothes and valuables. SS execution commandos shoot them at close range, and they tumble into the ditches. You and your men are 200 to 400 meters away from the execution site.

As a German officer in a wartime situation, what do you do? Suggest three options; then, with your decision group, select the one you think is the most morally and practically justified. Be prepared to tell why you selected it.

The decision groups vary in the level of intensity of their discussion, and there are still some students whose participation is minimal. But in groups of three or four, all have a good chance to express their ideas, and a watchful instructor in a class of 20 or 30 students has little trouble noting participation problems and providing some encouragement to correct them. In larger groups, one or more assistants can be added to circulate among the groups as facilitators.

I do not know how you have responded to INSTRUCTION B, but my student responses ranged from "I'd do nothing," to "I'd complain to my superior officers," to "I'd try to desert." Someone raised the question: "are we to respond as <u>we</u> believe right, or as we <u>think</u> a German officer would have done?" I stress that they should respond as they believe they would have responded in those circumstances.

Here is FEEDBACK B.

FEEDBACK B

Many German officers, in such situations, simply followed orders and kept their mouths shut. Whether they approved of the killings or not, they decided that the mass executions were not their responsibility.

But Lieutenant Bingel, who is not fictional, believed that the killings were wrong, and decided to do something. He did not attempt to intervene directly to stop the shootings. But he and his men carefully gathered evidence, including names and descriptions of the perpetrators, the number of people killed, and even photographs of the "action." After the war, he told the whole story to allied interrogators. Here is part of his description:[5]

> One row of Jews was ordered to move forward and was then allocated to the different tables where they had to undress completely and hand over everything they wore and carried. Some still carried jewelery which they had to put on the table. Then, having taken off all their clothes, they were made to stand in line in front of the ditches, irrespective of their sex. The commandos then marched in behind the line and began to perform the inhuman acts, the horror of which is now known to the whole world.
>
> With automatic pistols and 0.8 pistols these men mowed down the line with such zealous intent that one could have supposed this activity to have been their life-work. Even women carrying chiidren a fortnight to three weeks

[5]The document is published in Yad Washem Studies (Ktav Publishing, 1975), pp. 303-320, and contains a list of the SS officers in charge of the killings.

old, sucking at their breasts, were not spared this horrible ordeal. The people in the first row thus having been killed in the most inhuman manner, those in the second row were now ordered to step forward. . . .

The whole "action" took place between 8 a.m. and 4:30 p.m. At 5 p.m. the square lay deserted in deadly desolation and only some dogs, attracted by the scent of blood in the air, were roving the site. The shots were still ringing in our ears. The whole thing might have seemed to me to be a terrifying nightmare but for the sparsely covered ditches which gleamed at us accusingly.

All this was so incomprehensible. How could a nation have the audacity to perpetrate, through its supreme leader and his Elite troop, acts as such as these for which there could be no excuse under any circumstances?

Direct confrontation with this document, even in its abridged form, is a sobering experience. Students raise questions: "How could the Nazis do this? Why didn't the Jews fight back?" Depending on the time available, the instructor can pause to discuss these questions directly or press on to the next INSTRUCTION. In any case, my experience has been that by this time all but the most jaded of my students are motivated to learn more about this topic, motivated in a way that the most eloquent of my lectures seems impossible to achieve.

Please turn to INSTRUCTION C.

INSTRUCTION C

It is the spring of 1942. You are Frau Sara Stein, a Berlin Jewish woman in her twenties, married, with no children. Since September 1941 you have worn the Jewish star; little by little you have been deprived of all

your civil and legal rights. Your ration cards and your passport have been stamped with a large J, so you get less food and are not permitted to travel beyond Berlin. But you have stayed out of trouble with the authorities and the local Brown Shirts, so you have not suffered any direct physical abuse. In May you and your husband receive the following form letter[6] with your name filled in:

Jewish Religious
Assn. of Berlin
Berlin, May 29, 1942

Mr.
Mrs._____
Miss

Transport No._____

Re: Removal

Your removal has been officially set for June 2, 1942. This ruling is valid for you, your spouse, and your unmarried family members, as they are indicated on the official declaration of property values. If you have, in the mean time, received a written authorization to remain behind, that document is to be returned with all its attachments to the Jewish Religious Assn. of Berlin, 31 Oranienburger Street.

On Sunday, May 31, 1942, you may bring your luggage to be sent ahead to the Levetzow Street assembly station between 9 a.m. and 1 p.m. On Monday, June 1, 1942, beginning at 6 a.m. your home will be sealed by a public official. You must be ready at this time. Building and room keys are to be given to this official.

---

[6]Translated and abridged from Beiträge zum Thema Widerstand: 6 (Informationszentrum Berlin, 1975), p. 25.

> We will be responsible for food and drink at the assembly station and during the rail trip. However, you should bring with you, in your hand luggage, any food you have left at home, especially sandwiches for supper.
>
> Enclosed you will find a memorandum which contains all the regulations which must be observed. We ask you from our hearts to follow these regulations most exactly, and to prepare for the transport peacefully and prudently. It goes without saying that we, in so far as it is permitted, will do everything to stand by our fellow community members and render to them all possible help.
>
> Jewish Religious Assn.
> of Berlin
> The Board of Directors

What do you do? Consider your options with your decision group, narrow them down to one, and be ready to tell why you chose it.

Tell me. What would you do? Run? Hide? Arm yourself and defend your apartment? Do as you're told? Hope for the best? It is a letter from a Jewish organization, after all, one of the few which the Nazis still allowed to exist. Did Sara Stein know, by that time, what would happen to her at the end of the train trip? There were rumors, I tell the students, but no certain information.

The fifty minutes of the class period is nearly over by the time we've read INSTRUCTION C. One might suspend the exercise and pass out the FEEDBACK C at the next class hour. Indeed, one could spread the exercise over several hours, using only the first and the last few minutes of each hour for the Guided Design. Such tactics might work well in high school level classes, where instructors often shift teaching approaches several times within a single hour. Wales and Stager have built entire courses on the Guided Design approach, having their engineering students meet in decision

groups between class periods, gathering information, designing traffic patterns, computing stresses and flows, and building bridges on paper.

But we are committed to finishing the exercise in a single period so we turn to FEEDBACK C.

FEEDBACK C

Sara Stein is a fictitious name. Like tens of thousands of other Berlin Jews, law abiding citizens that they were, she probably followed orders. They were loaded into trains--usually boxcars--taken to remote places in Eastern Europe, and shot, gassed, or assigned to slave labor gangs to be worked to death. Some Berlin Jews, like Ilse Rewald[7], refused to respond to the summons and went underground. They abandoned their homes, took off their yellow stars, roomed secretly with helpful German Gentiles, picked up odd jobs where they could, and lived in daily fear that they might be recognized and denounced to the Gestapo. Some used underground connections to escape to neutral Switzerland. Others lived out the war right in the midst of Berlin.

Heinrich Himmler, head of the SS and chief administrator of the "final solution to the Jewish problem," once complained in a secret speech to his SS officers that every German had his "decent Jew" whom he wanted to protect from deportation. Eighty million Germans would agree that Jews in general "were swine," Himmler said, but each German still knew a Jew who was all right and who should be saved.[8] By 1943 the Nazis declared that Berlin was officially "free of Jews," but underground Jews clung to a tenuous existence in Berlin and elsewhere in Germany. Many of these, like Ilse Rewald, survived the war; in Berlin 4,000

---

[7]Ilse Rewald, "Berliner, die uns halfen . . . " in Beiträge zum Thema Widerstand: 6 (Informationszentrum Berlin, 1975), pp. 2-14.

[8]Himmler quoted in Raul Hilberg, The Destruction of the European Jews (Chicago, 1961), p. 660.

or 5,000 Jews were living underground in 1943, and about 1100 are known to have survived there to be liberated in 1945.[9]

And thus ends this decision making exercise. Any number of other dilemma situations have doubtless come to mind related to this particular topic. Should Rabbi Leo Baeck, leader of the German Jews under the Nazis, have passed along the information he had that the trains were carrying their cargoes to almost certain death? Would you, as an ordinary German, have risked your family to shelter an underground Jew? Should Pope Pius XII have made a strong public statement on Hitler's "final solution" even if it would inspire Nazi retaliation against the Church? Should FDR have taken steps to try to rescue Jews immediately threatened by the Nazis, even if it meant delaying the military victory over the Nazis? As you review in your minds the topics you teach, possibilities for developing Guided Design exercises for your own curriculum will become apparent. I urge you to give it a try, and to let me know how it goes.

I do not offer this adaptation of the Guided Design as a total replacement for traditional lectures, readings, exams, and papers in your history courses. But I do suggest that it may be a useful supplement, a valid change of pace. Working within the inevitable and self-imposed limitations of the classroom, no student can fully know what it must have been like to have been a German soldier or a persecuted Jew in the Nazi era. The Guided Design feeds the students only part of the relevant information; it does not replicate the cultural context, or threaten the students with actual consequences which their actions might bring. An expanded Guided Design, of course, could do more, requiring out-of-class research and decision group discussion, or systematically addressing the questions of moral philosophy implied by the problems which are posed. However elaborate the exercises, they would still fall short in simulating reality. But neither does any book, lecture, or film, fully present the totality of the historical experience. By introducing planned student involvement through the Guided Design, I suggest, we have a method to bring our students to a level of personal understanding of an era which few of them possess as they leave our classrooms on a typical day.

---

[9] Nora Levin, The Holocaust (New York, 1968), p. 499, and Leonard Gross, The Last Jews in Berlin (New York, 1983), pp. 101, 258.